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SUBJECT: CAMBODIA'S BOHEMIAN KING - THE HONEYMOON IS NOT YET OVER

Classified By: Ambassador Charles A. Ray. Reason: 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: King Norodom Sihamoni continues to reach out to people across Cambodia, bringing a new sense of dignity to the royal house. Though most of his forays into the countryside are carefully scripted, on occasion he breaks the bonds and makes a solid connection with the crowds. His careful, well-modulated speeches, though prompted as much by his lack of familiarity with his native Khmer as anything, have been a welcome change from the high-pitched speech characteristic of his father and older half brother. He has broken many of his father's traditions, most notably being his insistence on having Khmer rather than North Korean bodyguards, and having a less obvious security presence around him when he meets with people. The Czech Ambassador describes Sihamoni as the "Bohemian King of Cambodia," a man who speaks Czech like a native, and who thinks of Prague as his hometown. Sihamoni's relationship with the Hun Sen-led government thus far has been without the tensions that existed during his father's time on the throne. While it seems clear that Hun Sen wants a non-political king, it appears equally obvious that he is not anti-monarchy. The most probable threat to the new King still seems to be the ambitions of his half brother, the mercurial Prince Ranariddh. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) King Norodom Sihamoni has kept up a punishing schedule of visits to various provinces in Cambodia since his coronation, most recently attending Les Nuits d'Angkor in Siem Reap, much to the delight of the Cambodian members of the dance troupe. Each week, he visits a different rural area of the kingdom, speaking to the people, and most important, listening to their concerns. He projects an aura of calm that has in short order restored some of the dignity to the throne, according to some local observers. Though his trips are well scripted, included carefully prepared speeches, he often breaks away from his entourage and gets close to the crowd. At one such event which Ambassador attended, people in the crowd cried after touching his hand. Even some youth, who were noncommittal about the throne before his coronation, seem genuinely moved by his obvious compassion and concern.

¶3. (C) Sihamoni speaks in a calm, well-modulated voice, a welcome relief from the high-pitched nasal tones of his father Norodom Sihanouk. His slow, measured speech, an effective method of gaining an audience's attention, is also due to his unfamiliarity with his native Khmer. Sihamoni has lived abroad for almost his entire adult life, and is far more comfortable in other languages. He lived and studied in the former Czechoslovakia, for example, from the ages of 9 to 22, and according to the Czech Ambassador, speaks Czech like a Prague native. In fact, the Ambassador said, during his courtesy call Sihamoni told him he hoped the people of Prague were "proud of him for what he had accomplished." Jokingly,

the Ambassador said that Sihanoni has been the Czech Republic's most significant export to Asia. The last Bohemian King, from the house of Hapsburg, spoke Czech haltingly and preferred his native German, while the "Bohemian King of Cambodia" speaks perfect Czech, and even signs his name "Sihanony."

¶4. (C) The new king has also broken tradition in regard to his bodyguards. Unlike his father who has a contingent of North Koreans, Sihanoni has insisted on having Khmer security, albeit trained by the more experienced North Koreans. Prince Norodom Sirivudh, Deputy Prime Minister and co-Minister of the Interior, told Ambassador that on his first trip to the provinces, Sihanoni took several of his father's guards and people complained about their gruff behavior. He then decided, Sirivudh said, to have them provide technical training to Cambodians and since, he has been surrounded by Khmer bodyguards. At a Phnom Penh outing in early December, even the North Korean who is training the contingent was not in sight. Sihanoni also does not have guards in sight during his audiences, unlike Sihanouk who has a North Korean with him at all times when he is in public.

¶5. (C) Some international commentators have speculated that Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has had a difficult relationship with the former king, wants to abolish the monarchy in Cambodia. Our observations since Sihanoni's coronation are that, while the Prime Minister prefers a non-political king, and probably would not hesitate to destroy the monarchy if it posed a real threat to his hold on power, he is not anti-monarchy. Relations between the palace and the Council of Ministers appear to be proper, and in some instances even cordial. One senior CPP official has described Sihanoni as a "king we can work with." For his part, Sihanoni has moved slowly but steadily to establish the throne as a voice for the voiceless, and as an institution that aims to help those most in need of help. The most obvious threat to Sihanoni still seems to stem from his half brother Prince Norodom Ranariddh, currently president of the National Assembly and head of the royalist FUNCINPEC party. At a lunch with Ambassador on December 21, Ranariddh reiterated that he loves being in politics and did not want to be king. But even those closest to him don't really believe him, and what he might do, or try to do, after Sihanouk dies remains a mystery.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: It is probably too early to predict the success or failure of the reign of King Norodom Sihanoni, but all the signs point toward success, and that is important in itself as he has assumed his position at a time when the Cambodian monarchy was at its nadir. He seems to be emulating the much respected Thai King by being the father figure who stays above politics and who acts as the conscience of the nation and the voice of the poor. He is increasingly, it seems, exploring the limits of his ability to act within the constitution, and making adjustments as he goes along. As an example, early on he proposed holding national conferences as called for in the constitution, but Hun Sen objected. Sihanoni dropped the idea, but has since been meeting with small groups and listening to their grievances - a sort of mini-conference. Another win for Sihanoni came when Hun Sen, who initially objected to monthly cabinet briefings for the king, later announced publicly that he and his cabinet would do so on a monthly basis. The ruling party needs the monarchy to help validate its own legitimacy, and as long as Sihanoni avoids the details of politics he will probably have CPP support. If he continues to reach out to the people as successfully as he has this past few months, there could come a day if he is threatened by anyone (e.g., Prince Ranariddh), he would have the CPP and the whole country at his back.